

More Than Just a Program

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Summary: She had always been more than just a computer program to him.

More Than Just a Program

****Hey, sorry that I have not been updating my 'On the Beach' fic lately, but I've had a lot of stuff to do. Stuff such as: looking for a new job, saving up for an overseas trip, playing the Xbox 360 (just finished Mass Effect 3!), working on my own official novel so as to get my writing career underway, seeking a way in which I can ensure that a TRUE Knights of the Old Republic III gets created (don't get me started on that damn MMORPG because that is NOT what most fans wanted!), and so on.****

****Still, a few nights ago, I was having trouble sleeping and this idea just popped into my head. I decided to type it up and post it. It's not officially part of any other John/Cortana fics that I've done, but I guess it could easily fit into them.****

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><p>More Than Just a Program

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><p>"I'd like to introduce you to Cortana."<p>

The Master Chief had heard of Artificial Intelligences that had been integrated into vital systems to provide further cover and vital intelligence assets for soldiers and officers while they were on the field, but his experience in that area was limited. He had dealt with AI before, such as his teacher Deja back at boot camp, but that was as close as it had gotten.

And yet, Dr Halsey was explaining to him about this new AI that he

would essentially be partnered with " this _Cortana_ " and he felt himself getting more apprehensive by the second as he learned that she would pretty much be literally operating from inside his mind. The Chief had dealt with many things over the years, ranging from the scary to the strange, but having another entity occupying his mind fell into both of those categories. That was not exactly something that he was comfortable with, especially if she might have conflicting directives.

But he trusted Dr Halsey, and if she assured him that it would be safe, then he would swallow his pride and take her word for it.

He let the doctor insert Cortana's memory-processor matrix into his neural lace, and he felt a rush of cool liquid being poured into his brain. There was a spike of pain, but this faded quickly.

"Not a lot of room in here," a smooth female voice said. "Hello, Master Chief."

It was somewhat unsettling for the Chief, as he could hear her speaking over his suit's speakers, but it also felt as though she was talking directly inside his head. Nonetheless, he gave a polite reply. "Hello, Cortana."

Cortana hummed thoughtfully. "I'm detecting a high degree of cerebral cortex activity. You're not the muscle-bound automatons the press makes you out to be."

"Automaton?" the Chief responded. "Interesting choice of words for an Artificial Intelligence."

Dr Halsey watched and listened to the pair with great interest. "You must forgive Cortana, Master Chief," she said. "She is somewhat high-spirited. You may have to allow for behavioural quirks."

"Yes, ma'am."

As the good doctor went on to explain the test that the two of them would be undertaking together, the Chief got the feeling that his new AI partner was more than just a sentient computer program.

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><p>Only a few minutes later, the test was just beginning. The Master Chief prepared to run the course and Cortana had begun her job of analysing the data from the makeshift battlefield before them.<p>

"Analysing sound pattern," Cortana said. "Database match. Identified as "

"As someone cycling the bolt of an MA5B assault rifle," the Chief cut her off. "I know. Standard issue weapons for Orbital Drop Shock Troopers." It figured; ODSTs did not think too highly of Spartans, and it was not a stretch to imagine that some would have volunteered for a mission " even a practice one " where they could have taken a Spartan down a notch.

"Since you're 'in the know', Master Chief," Cortana quipped, "I assume you have a plan."

"Yes."

"Presumably your plan doesn't involve getting shotâ€|?"

"No."

"So what's the plan?"

"I'm going to finish counting to ten." Sure, this AI may have battlefield tactics and solutions programmed into her, but the Chief had first-hand experience from more than two hundred skirmishes against the Covenant. She had book smarts, but he had street smarts.

He heard Cortana sigh in frustration, and he could only shake his head in puzzlement. He had never encountered a 'smart' AI before, but she actually sounded more human than anything else.

She was more than just a computer program; that was for sure.

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><p>"Scanningâ€| Just dust and echoes. We're all that's left."<p>

For the past three days, the Master Chief â€" John â€" had been running mostly on adrenaline. He had not had time to take note of all the wounds he had sustained over the course of the battle on the mysterious ring world called Halo, but now that all of that was wearing off, he was beginning to feel it. It all hurt, but he tried the best he could to push it all to a corner of his consciousness and keep it together for just a little while longer.

Humanity had lost Reach, the world on which he had spent much of his life and where he had been trained and refined into a Spartan. He had led a disparate force of soldiers, officers, Marines and the like to Halo, where they had attempted to conduct a campaign against the relentless Covenant forces.

They were all gone now; Johnson, Foehammer, Captain Keyes, they were now just dust and echoes, as Cortana had said.

Cortana. She was still here. She was still with him. They had been separated for a while as he had been manipulated by that Monitor calling itself Guilty Spark into firing the ring, which would have resulted in the deaths of all life forms, all to defeat the nightmarish parasitic entity calling itself the Flood. But she had returned in time to stop him from making a terrible mistake. And now they were the only two known survivors, drifting in a single UNSC Longsword fighter amidst the new field of rubble that had once been Halo Installation 04. A field of rubble that he himself had created.

"It's finished," said Cortana.

"No," the Chief replied as he started to remove his helmet. "I think we're just getting started."

He had lost so much in so little time, and yet, Cortana was still

there. His AI. His partner. His friend.

So much more than just a program.

* * *

><p>"Don't make a girl a promise if you know you can't keep it."<p>

Those had been the last words that Cortana had said to the Chief when he had been forced to leave her behind on High Charity. The city that floated in space and served as the capital of the Covenant, now gradually being infested by the Flood, and torn apart by an internal conflict between the Elites and the Brutes. It was a veritable hell in space, and Cortana had insisted that he leave her behind, just in case she needed to detonate it to destroy the infection.

The thought of Cortana being forced to destroy herself gave the Chief a heavy feeling in his stomach; one that he was doing his best to ignore so that he could properly focus on the mission at hand. He needed to follow the Prophet of Truth, wherever he was heading, and stop him before he could put into motion whatever insidious plan he had.

The mission came first. He understood that, and Cortana understood that. It was what they were meant to do.

But that still did not prevent the Chief from feeling some despair at the whole situation. Cortana may have been a piece of equipment, but she was important to him in ways that many people simply did not understand.

She was his friend his partner.

She was more than just a computer program.

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><p>"You found me."<p>

The Chief had braved the terrifying depths of the Flood-infested High Charity, trying to find his partner. They needed to activate the new Halo installation and neutralise the Flood once and for all. They could easily have waited for Guilty Spark to fabricate a new Index, but the Chief knew of a quicker solution. He remembered Cortana still had the one from the original Halo in her programming. He just needed to find her and retrieve it. It was all part of the mission.

But the Chief knew he would be lying to himself if he said that. There was much more to it than that. He had not been the same ever since he had parted from Cortana during the battle at the Delta Halo. He had frequently been having visions of her, asking if he was willing to sacrifice her for the greater good, or her simply her sanity.

The Master Chief knew that he would not sacrifice her. Not now, not ever. To do so would be sacrificing part of himself.

"But so much of me feels wrong," she said in a quivering voice. "Out of place. You might be too late."

He placed his helmeted head close to the pedestal where she lay. "You know me," he said gently. "When I make a promiseâ€|"

"You keep it," she finished. "I do know how to pick 'em."

"Lucky me."

But he considered himself lucky simply because he had her with him. Many of the other people he cared about had fallen, and yet she remained beside him all the way. She protected him as much as he protected her. He had been forced to leave her behind, but that was rectified now.

She returns to the neural chip, which he replaces in the slot at the back of his head. The familiar rush of cold liquid seeping into his brain was one of the most wonderful feelings he ever felt. And if it caused him pain, he would endure it over and over again just to be with her.

She was more than just a program to him, and she always would be.

* * *

><p>"I'll miss you," Cortana said as his pod hissed closed.<p>

It was finally over. Decades of conflict between the human race and the Covenant had concluded after so many years of bloodshed. The Covenant was dissolved, the Flood was eradicated, and the UNSC could finally rebuild.

But the Master Chief and Cortana were out here, stranded in the depths of space, so far from home. The only hope they had was for him to go into stasis for the time while she kept a watchful eye out for anyone or anything that could bring them back.

It had only been a few months since the Chief had first met Cortana, and in that time period, he had probably endured more hardship and difficulties than most people would in their entire lives. And yet, he would go through them all again for her.

The very notion of a human feeling such affection for a computer program, even one as brilliant as Cortana, was a baffling notion. The Chief knew this. But as he thought about all that he and Cortana had done for each other, he realised that he did not care what other people might have thought. He cared about her in a way that no other people had evoked in him, and he felt as though he was a better person for it.

Now he was going into cryo stasis, in the hope that someone would hear their calls and stage a rescue of them. He would be in a deep slumber for that period, but Cortana would lie awake â€" not that AI ever actually slept â€" and she would watch over him, taking care of the man who had ultimately saved the human race and the entire galaxy.

The man that she cared deeply about.

"Wake meâ€| when you need me."

The Chief uttered these words as the lid of his pod finally sealed shut, and he slipped into a deep sleep, knowing that he would be watched over by his friend. His partner. His guardian angel.

So much more than just a program.

* * *

><p>"Wake up, John!"<p>

"CHIEF!"

Cortana's frenzied voice was what jolted the Chief back into action. Though he had spent years in cryo, he did his best to shake off the effects that came with it. Right now, it seemed as though the ruined form of _Forward Unto Dawn_ was finally in its last moments of life. The once resolute hull began to shudder as explosions ripped through it. John had no idea what was causing this, but now was not the time to wonder. Now was the time to survive and get back into the fight.

Floating in the zero gravity, he grasped the pedestal where Cortana stood, worry evident on her holographic features. Despite the seriousness of the situation and the hurry in which he was forced to carry out his necessary actions, he could still not help but feel a sense of muted joy at seeing her again. He had no idea what was happening or how much time had passed, but just seeing her was worth it to him.

Reacting quickly, he grabbed her chip from the slot in the pedestal and shoved it back in the slot, secretly relishing the feeling of cold liquid seeping into his brain once more. Pushing off, he floated through the battered ruins of the vessels, dodging the floating debris with the skill of someone who had spent much of his life running obstacle courses.

At the end of the run, he grabbed the beam to prevent them from being thrown out into space. Before them loomed a massive object the likes of which neither of them had seen before. A giant portal began to open, and the Master Chief had the feeling that he was about to embark on another terrifying journey.

And all he had with him was his armour, a few weapons, and Cortana. Despite the lingering fear that he had about her possible onset of rampancy, he would never stop trusting her. Whatever they were about to face, they would do it together.

Because she had always been so much more than just a computer program.

* * *

><p>They had been through so much together, from the Covenant to the Flood and more, but everything they had done was so that they could have moments like this. They had made it back to Earth long ago, and though it was not perfect, it was what they had been fighting for. The human race had weathered one threat after another, and it seemed as though it was time for them to catch their collective breath and rebuild their society.<p>

As for John, he may have been practically created to fight, but he felt that his time for fighting was over. Enough lives had been ended by his hands, and enough destruction had been caused on his part. Now it was just time for him to live.

And the most important thing was that he had someone to live that life with.

While looking out into the sunset, John felt a hand wrap around his and he looked to his side, giving a gentle smile at the owner of that hand. Even after all this time, it still felt a little strange to him; seeing her like this. But he would not change it for the world.

Upon returning to Earth, Cortana had begun to exhibit signs of the feared AI rampancy. Fortunately, a solution had been presented to them. Dr Halsey had worked with a team of scientists " mostly human, but also a few Sangheili and even a few Huragok " and they had made a serious breakthrough in technology. They had been able to create a process in which an artificial intelligence could be transferred into the brain of a cloned human being. It would allow them to take control of the brain, and thus the whole body.

An AI could become human.

Cortana had been the first to undergo the procedure, but had passed with flying colours. Now she inhabited a body that had been cloned and perfected " possessing none of the faults that previous clones had possessed " and was made from DNA donated by Dr Halsey herself.

Now a living and breathing human being, Cortana could physically touch John, and whenever he held her close, she felt safer than she had ever been in her life. She was not just a chip in his helmet anymore. No, now, she was more than that.

Even back when he was just a biochemically augmented super-soldier, and she was an Artificial Intelligence, there were many indicators that showed how deep the bond between the two of them truly went. The way they talked and responded to each other, how they looked out for each other even when they were not undertaking a particularly harrowing mission, the fact that they would go out of their way to protect each other

And now she was human, just like him. But even though she was flesh and blood, she was still the same old Cortana that he knew and loved. She was still extremely stubborn and quick-witted, and capable of making even the toughest individual back down with a simple glare.

And he would not change her for anything. She was the woman he loved with all of his heart.

John repositioned his arm so that Cortana was under it, being held close to his side, and she rested her head against his muscular chest. As he looked down at her, John smiled. He smiled at the sight of the matching rings on their fingers, and at the slight bulge in her abdomen, where their first child continued to grow within her.

It could have been said that Cortana was more than just a sentient computer program now. But as far as John was concerned, she had always been more than that.

So much more, indeed.

* * *

><p>Well, that's it. I wrote this up in a bit of a hurry, so it might not be as good quality as I would like, but I'm still happy with it. I'm more concerned with whether or not YOU are happy with it, my good readers!

By the way, the events describe go from the **_Fall of Reach**_** novel to the start of the fourth game (can't wait!) and the last one is obviously my own contribution. ;) **

Anyway, I'll try to get back on track with my 'On the Beach' fic, which ironically enough, I started one year ago! Damn, I really need to update more often!

End
file.